THE SETS PROJECTS

The Sets projects started in the early 1970s with an element in the programme for the Monte Carlo Casino, a very theatrical outdoor space for events like the annual Red Cross gala ball. Our idea was to make an architecture which serviced the space and covered it in the event of rain, but at the same time was continually transformed by movie-sets. So the space could be Elizabethan, or Modern, or Art Deco, or whatever suited the event, as was illustrated in a series of collages at the time.

The notion of the Suburban Sets came from talking to my son Andrew, who was then at school and writing a paper about the architecture of Suburbia. We invented a suburb based on Woodford, where we live. The architecture was paper-thin scenery reflecting the public face which people chose to present to others. The facade windows served as Sets: the design and decoration would change according to what the occupants wanted the outside world to believe about their life-styles. Most importantly, there was behind the Sets a private world, a place where people could make their own environments. We chose three families to illustrate the idea: an architect who could use the notion intelligently, a camping enthusiast who had a trailer home

behind his facade (a really high-living camper), and a former bomber pilot whose private Set was the fuselage of an old B-24 Liberator. The idea was that they could choose the environment that they wanted to live in – they could be in Hawaii, or India, or on a bombing mission. From my observation, this is exactly what happens in the suburb: people build their own myth and reality into their houses.

The 'Sets Fit for the Queen' of 1975 started off as an entry to the Shinkenchiku competition to design 'A House for a Superstar'. I chose the Queen and the Royal Family as Britain's ultimate superstars and designed a palace which had as its antecedents the studios of Paramount and the great Hollywood production companies, as well as the stage-set facades of the Regent's Park terraces and Disneyland's Main Street, USA. The premiss was that the Royal Family lived in an essentially theatrical condition, moving from one set to another depending on what role they were expected to play at the time. For state occasions they could call up any kind of setting, be it coffee bar modern or Baroque or medieval or Art Deco. They had at their fingertips a catalogue from which they could choose or invent the new settings, including private settings where they could live out their own dreams at will. A workforce of people would build and change the

Sets. The building would twitch and shiver into life, becoming what the family wanted – the ultimate dream palace.

The most recent Sets project was a house for Gary Withers of Imagination. We started off by talking about the house that we'd seen in one of the Beatles movies, where they all go through different doors in a terrace and end up in a single space, a huge shed. The proposition was to buy a series of terrace houses in London, so you could enter through a number of front doors ... and find yourself in a shell. The whole space would be contained by the frontage with an adaptable frame behind it to carry variable floors and an adjustable roof. Gary's house would become sets that he could change at will. A space that was a vestibule and dining room one day could be a totally different vestibule and library or living room the next. It could be dressed up in a Baroque or a Modernist manner, just as Gary wished. In other words, the Sets would be Fit for Gary.

Upcoming Exhibitions

Studio Strips and The Sets Projects
Ron Herron
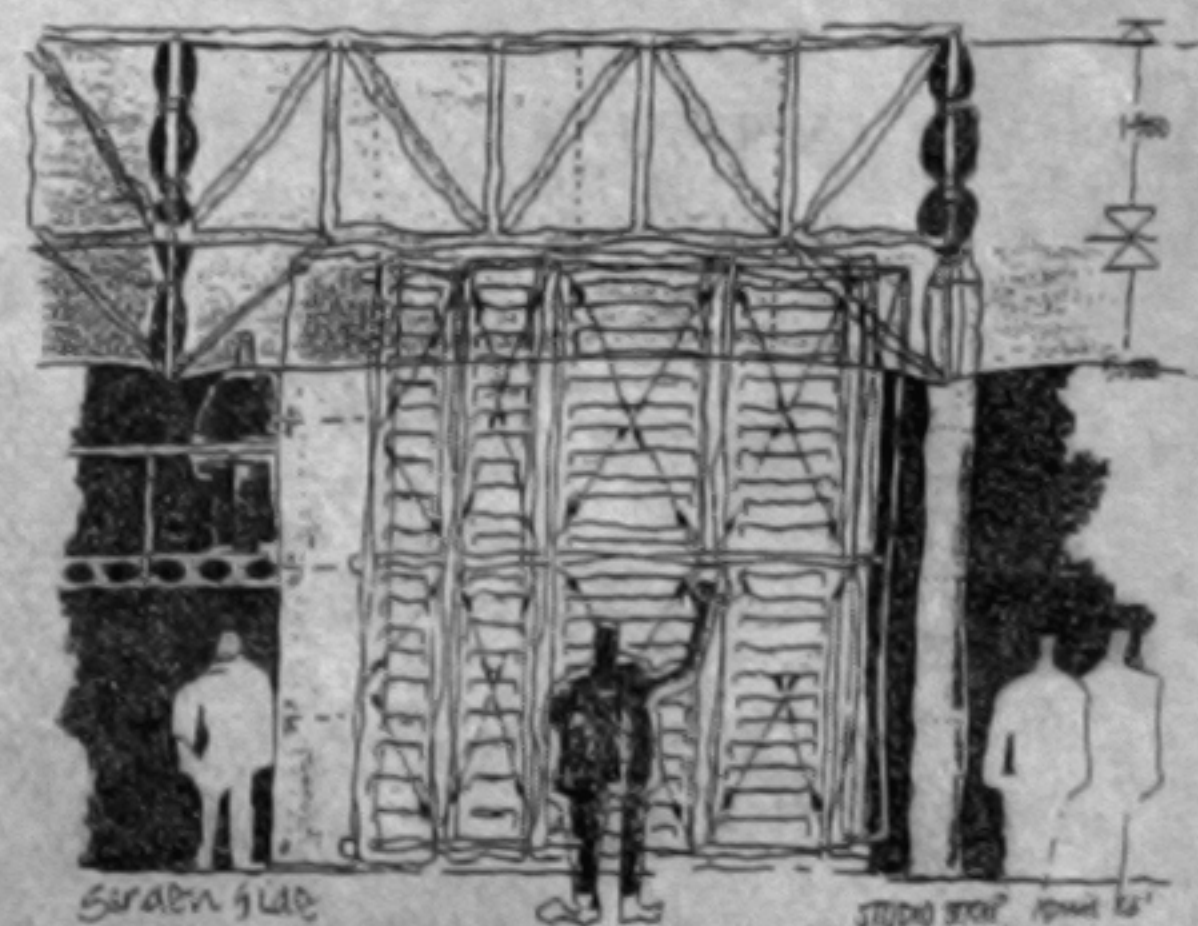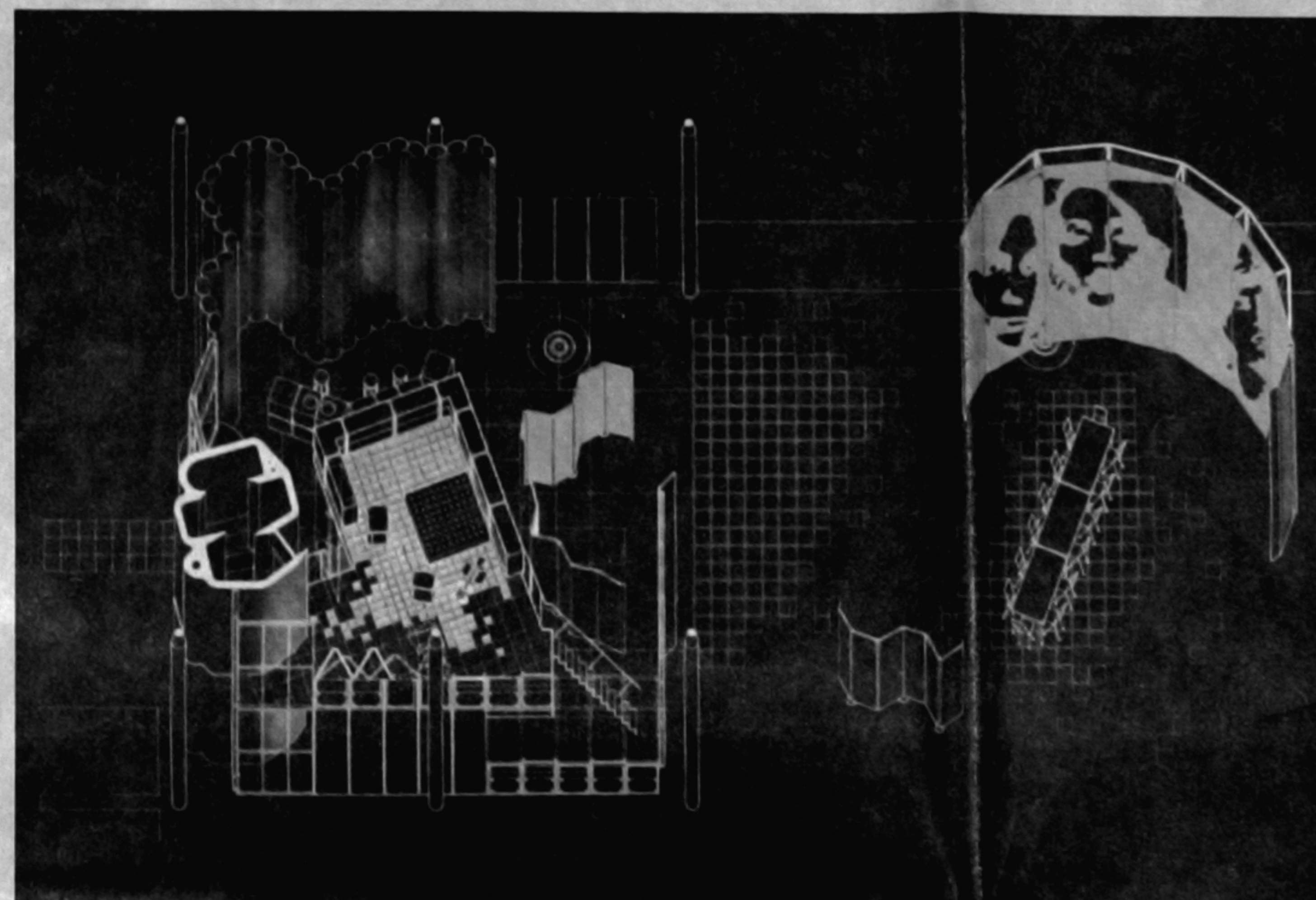
Archigram
Experimental Architecture, 1961-74

Warren Chalk   **Peter Cook**   **Dennis Crompton**   **David Greene**   **Ron Herron**   **Michael Webb**

StoreFront for Art & Architecture, in conjunction with Thread Waxing Space, Pratt Institute, Columbia and Cornell Universities presents the first ever major American exhibition on Archigram, the visionary English architectural collaborative. StoreFront will present selected works of Ron Herron. Archigram: Experimental Architecture, 1961-74 includes over 400 drawings, models, multi-media installations, magazines and recreated environments, and will be presented in the following spaces

SUBURBAN SETS

STOREFRONT
ART AND ARCHITECTURE
97 Kenmare Street, New York, NY 10012 U.S.A.

14 March- **25** April
opening reception 14, March 5-8pm

RON HERRON
Archigram

Contributors

STOREFRONT
ART AND ARCHITECTURE
97 Kenmare Street, New York, NY 10012 U.S.A.

Storefront for Art and Architecture is supported by The Stephen A. and Diana L. Goldberg Foundation, Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in Visual Arts, Greenwall Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, the New York City Dept. of Cultural Affairs and Friends.

Studio Strip

Following the Robohouse I made a project called Studio Strip, continuing a fascination with the idea of the robotised building which began, I suppose with an early Archigram project, Control and Choice, and with the Houses for the Year 1990 exhibition at Harrods. The idea was to make a strip or terrace of studio dwellings which consisted purely of a roof on a frame. The oddball thing was that the parts that made up the house – the walls, upper floor and screen elements – were entirely robotised so they could be driven into other positions to respond to the user. The screeen on the garden side, for example, was a drivable curved video wall, some 15 metres long and 6 metres high, which could be hinged to open outwards. You could therefore see the real garden, or play a video on the wall of any environment that you wished to be in, or even drive the wall right out into the garden, taking the idea of indoor/outdoor architecture to an extreme. The design was also of interest because it allowed us to experiment with one of our early computer models, after we managed to convince an animation studio to animate it for us. With Dennis Crompton, who did some trickery with the backcloths, we made a video that was eventually shown at the German Architecture Museum in the 1986 exhibition, Vision der Moderne. The video starts with an animated walk into the Studio Strip. Then you see me sitting in the computer model with moving images on the video wall behind me – I'm in a real space talking about real images. In the end sequence the screen opens, and I'm sitting in my own garden finishing the conversation.

This animation sequence was an early attempt of ours to simulate a real environment, and I still find it quite fascinating.

During the 1960s and early '70s, Warren Chalk, Peter Cook, Dennis Crompton, David Greene, Ron Herron and Michael Webb, came together to produce Archigram Magazine (from ARCHitectural teleGRAM), which challenged mainstream publications and ideas with radical alternatives to cities, houses and architectural archetypes. They drew inspiration from a variety of contemporary sources, including space travel, science fiction, the Beatles and underground culture, for their Walking Cities, Plug-In environments and Capsule structures. These projects had repercussions on subsequent avant-garde architecture and art in Europe, the United States and Japan.

Outlines of Real Illusions

At first sight, the world of Ron Herron's drawings looks suspiciously like a theme park: cardboard public facades fronting mysterious zones filled with scaffolding and unexpected machinery clearly intended for the management of illusions. Yet these are not mere sets or scenography: the mysteries manufactured behind the facades are no less important or consequential than the assertions made by their public elevations. Conventional architecture may show and radical interior fantasy are here erected equal—and the ghostly chuckle you may hear in the historical background could, just, be Inigo Jones, who long ago laid down the ground-rules for the Great British Architectural Illusion. Outwardly every once man cometh a Greek in Publick Places, yet inwardly hath his imaginary set on fire and surmises licenciously flying out, as nature herself doeth often times strangguidly...

But then again, the Herron world can also look more like dispensing machines or music-centers sitting unattended, snug and self-contained, in Arcadian glades, offering to transform a waste place into a Garden of unmistakably Earthly Delights. Or it can offer what appear to be space-vehicles, or historic dirigibles, dangling complex arrays of audio-visual equipment mockingly above ancient cities and Victorian suburbs, leaving what stands upon the ground transformed in meaning and use; yet unchanged in physical fabric, just as it can threaten to invade the interiors of existing structures and leave them utterly transmogrified, without disturbing a single brick or ancestral joist.

And first impressions do not utterly deceive: what is projected here is a very strange world indeed, where software inspires hardware to re-jig our given built-ware—a world made more disturbing for being only about a half-frame ahead of the current reality which will come up on the screen, with no assistance from architects, after the next batch of commercials. Ron Herron has, already been around long enough to see the allegedly impractical projects in his early sketches come true in the hands of other architects, and occasionally his own. However visionary his drawings remain persuasive to so-called practical men, and the highly finished ones in particular contain (on appear to contain) plausible components and details and clip-on equipment for making it all happen, far-making illusion realistically real. The drawn hardware may be no more than allegories, as it were, of real-world (and real-time stuff, but it is rarely a long jump from the allegory to the actual hardware that will soon be on-line to do the job.

If one looks at his sketchbooks, however, rather than the block-busting presentation drawings, one can see that there may be a very good reason why there should be this venue of being less than a frame-scan away from practicality, at the level of his first-approximation sketches, the proposed structures and installations rarely seem to imply anything more than conventional current technologies of equipment and construction, bricolated together with off-the-shelf componentry—though not always from the world of regular architecture. And that too should come as no great surprise, since Herron's other output is somewhat at variance with the world of regular architecture.

Paradoxically though, there can be no nonsense about him not being an architect. He is not a structural nor a systems engineer, in spite of his knowledge of both areas; he is not a computer whiz, nor even a 'hacker,' though few living architects are quite so computer-friendly. He is himself, and in his generation, entirely at home in the world of current technology, yet always and entirely an architect. He knows exactly what he is after when he goes round invading the professional turf of adjacent specialization (or even remote ones) but when he returns from these forays of design-piracy he does not appear bent over the burdened down, as were the Machines Aesthetics of the 1920s, with the weight and importance of the loot he has acquired. He still occupies his usual professional posture.

He never ceases to think and design like an architect, so that if his projects appear strange, they are no more than strange, rather than alien or threatening, to other architects, and the excitement that he derives from these forays is communicable to other architects by purely architectural means—or drawings, as they are more usually called.

The pleasures of the chase, the swagger of the returning explorer, are there even in the finished renderings, but you catch them raw and uncredited in the notebooks in which Ron Herron accumulates and refines his architectural concepts, or occasionally records visual goodies that come his way. The processes by which forms and ideas are burglarized from other fields are manifold there, but what is striking is that the means of acquisition themselves: the techniques of capture and domestication for architectural purposes, are entirely conventional: not to say traditional—a Pentel R50 ballpen, Magic Markers, all that kind of familiar stuff. Only a little material is collaged in as found; the historic method of architectural recording—designs, dessin, tekening, zelchnung, drawing—is employed, and even his electronic outputs are computer graphics, right?

ROBOTS

Robots have cropped up in my work for many years. I am fascinated with the idea of the mechanical being, the servant-like object. Manzak was one of the early versions of this; a key sort of puppy dog that would follow you around and be your companion. Like a motor car, it came with many optional extras, such as voice command, or the ability to open up and make an enclosed personal space, or turn into an audio-visual seat. It was a friendly little object that respected Asimov's five laws of robotics.

Then there were the larger robots. The one made for imagination was a sort of carrying device brought out for events in the central space in Store Street. It was very theatrical, and on occasion it would be dressed up as Father Christmas or something else. The idea of the little servant and the big servant, no necessarily as human forms but rather as friendly, harmless objects, continued through one or two other projects. The Robohouse, for instance, had robotised rooms, screens, walls. The idea of elements of a building being controlled by voice command is close to realization with the current move towards voice-activated computers and the like. One can just dream of these robotised elements moving slowly and gracefully through space on command, making a truly responsive environment.

The point is important, that what Ron Herron offers is architecture still: not product design (even when he designs a product) nor print-layout (even when he lays out print). The trained eye that can recognize the presence of architecture will also recognize the trained hand that cannot help making architecture. Now, that phrase 'making architecture' is, in the sense employed here, almost the copyright of Renzo Piano, an architect to whom Ron Herron is in some ways very close, though neither of them may have noticed it yet. The difference between them—which is crucial—is that Piano's oeuvre is mostly built, whereas Ron Herron's vision is still largely on paper. The similarity—which is even more crucial—is that both seem equally obsessed with making sense, straightforward architectural sense, of the cornucopia of materials and methods that has been spilled across architects' drafting-boards by 'modern technology' (as we used to call it in the innocent beginnings of High-Tech).

TRACES OF HISTORY

The Traces of History project grew out of an interest in trying to combine new with old—a common theme throughout the history of architecture. It began with a vivid about 20 years ago to the Acropolis, when I saw the Erechtheum and Parthenon partly wrapped in scaffolding. I had the idea of making a kind of protective showcase for the cultural object. The wrapping protects the historical piece but at the same time changes continually. It becomes a building, and so becomes part of history. I think the juxtaposition of the light frame and the solid, heavy stone building somehow prints a way to an easily changed, elegant architecture, and I am interested in putting these things together.

—Reyner Banham
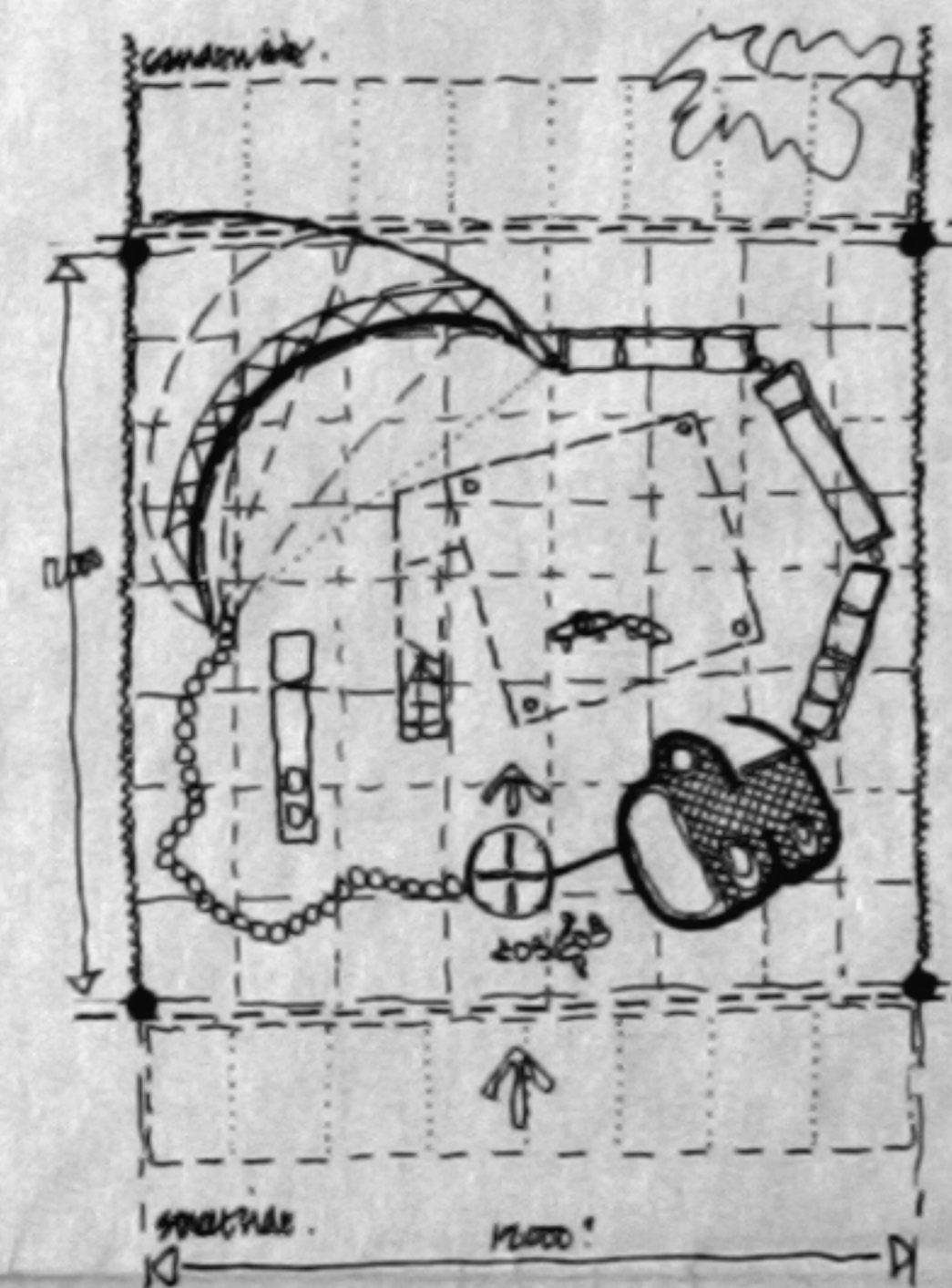from 'The Visions of Ron Herron,' Reyner Banham, Architectural Monographs No. 38, Academy Editions, 1994

Piano's architecture is proverbially made pezzo a pezzo, piece by piece, and in each piece one can recognize the craftsmanly thinking that has gone into making it: the right piece to make architecture, into turning the materials and technologies involved into components which, if assembled in the right order, make an ensemble that is as much architecture as were the pieces. And in Ron Herron's oeuvre one recognizes the craftsmanly creativity that has gone into hypothesizing pieces which, if made, could be assembled in the right order to make architecture. But whereas in Piano's case practically every piece is a 'special,' a total invention, the case with Herron is apt to be the other way around; that he has hypothesized a new architectural use for what looks unsettlingly like a commonplace component that is already in the catalogue (albeit the catalogue of some quite different human enterprise, as often as not).

In both cases, however, the objective seems to be the same, and it is the same obsessive objective that has been the power behind modern architecture since it became modern: to transmute the stuff of technology into the matter of architecture. Maybe that has been the power behind all architecture ever since it began, but for most of the three-thousand-odd years that the noble art has been around, that transmutation had been done so long ago, and was so immemorially enshrined in the inherited practices of carpentry, brickwork and masonry that it took no conscious effort on any individual architect's part, and the conventions of craftsmanship could operate unquestioned as the means of inducting the artifice required to make architecture out of those comfortably conventional technologies.

But the iron-masters of the 18th century dismantled architects from those cosy old traditions, and after them came the steel-masters and the cement-masters and the glass-masters and the plastic-masters and the light-masters and the air-masters and the power-masters and the system masters, all of whom have increased the distance that separates the business of making better buildings from the traditional art of making architecture.

Narrowing that gap to the point where it is once more possible to make architecture has been the substance of the patient search of Le Corbusier and the discipline classicism of Mies van der Rohe and the mystical intuitions of Louis Kahn and the structural heroics of Buckminster Fuller, and the draftsmanly visions of Archigram, of whom Ron Herron is a conspicuous survivor. And, after Archigram (as they themselves would modestly admit) came Rogers, Foster and the whole 'High Tech' fraternity, with its high-history ingenuities, which are either as obsessive as Archigram drawings. That gap is not to be narrowed by dressing up architecture to look like what it isn't, nor by dressing up the newer technologies to look like what they never were but architecture once was. The new state of the art of architecture can only be found through a penetrating understanding of what state-of-the-art technologies are really about.

'The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, in his knotty text "The Question Concerning Technology," proposed that we would never really understand technology as long as we considered it only in instrumental terms, as a mere means of getting things done: even 'the correct instrumental definition of technology still does not show us technology's essence.' Several knotted pages later he almost blows the whole proposition by announcing that 'The essence of technology is in a lofty sense ambiguous. (Thanks a bunch, Martin!) Such ambiguity points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth.

From here on, Heidegger's avowed destination is to discover the essence of Art, Life and all those traditional lofty abstractions, rather than the essences of commonplace technologies. But let us hold on to that idea of revelation and truth. All the breakthroughs towards an architecture of technology have been, in a literal sense, revelations—of how to make architecture, that pure creation of the human spirit, out of concrete, or steel, or glass, or whatever. And each revelation that has comprehended or uncovered an essence—the Villa Savoye, the Farnsworth House, just as much as the Pantheon or La Sainte Chapelle—has been a truth out of which architects can make architecture.

Not all such revelations have to be buildings. They could be a paragraph from Ruskin's Stones of Venice, or Geoffrey Scott's Architecture of Humanism, or even Asimov's Caves of Steel. But architects being the visual, graphics-besotted creatures they are, the revelations are more likely to be engraved plates in the works of Viollet-le-Duc, or the patient application drawing that revealed the essence of Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino, the space-cathedral sketches of Bruno Taut or the renderings of imaginary skyscrapers by Hugh Ferris, the Fun-Palace drawings of Cedric Price, the collared collages of Archigram's Peter Cook, or Ron Herron's Walking City drawing, a long-legged revelation stalking the surface of the globe, a truth or illusion in search of a site on which to settle and become real.

For the power of this revelation, what gives it the illusion of truth, is that it has the plausibility of a fully worked-out concept. Not the plausibility of a finished design, because the slightest of Ron Herron's sketches often show that same plausibility: they too elude the air of being the work of an architect who knows what he is about, and has got it all straight in the head, even if some ultimate details of form or connection remain to be worked out. Closely examined, the Walking City drawing clearly awaits the resolution of many such details since there is no way it could actually operate as physical, monumental fact as the drawing now stands. Yet it delivers a powerful illusion of reality, a kind of meme-image or counter-vision to the detailed plausibility of the gizmology behind the facades of the Suburban Sets that really looks as if it could make illusion real.

But then, the work of the architect as he bends over the paper, pencil in hand, is all illusion. He produces simulacra of reality, diagrams which, by some form of sympathetic magic, are supposed to cause real buildings to happen out in the instrumental world. We all know that it is not sympathetic magic, but a vast and frequently fallible industrial complex that will turn the illusory vision into real construction but, for architects, the moment of magic, the revelation of truth, is when the pencil marks the paper, and the process of making architecture begins.
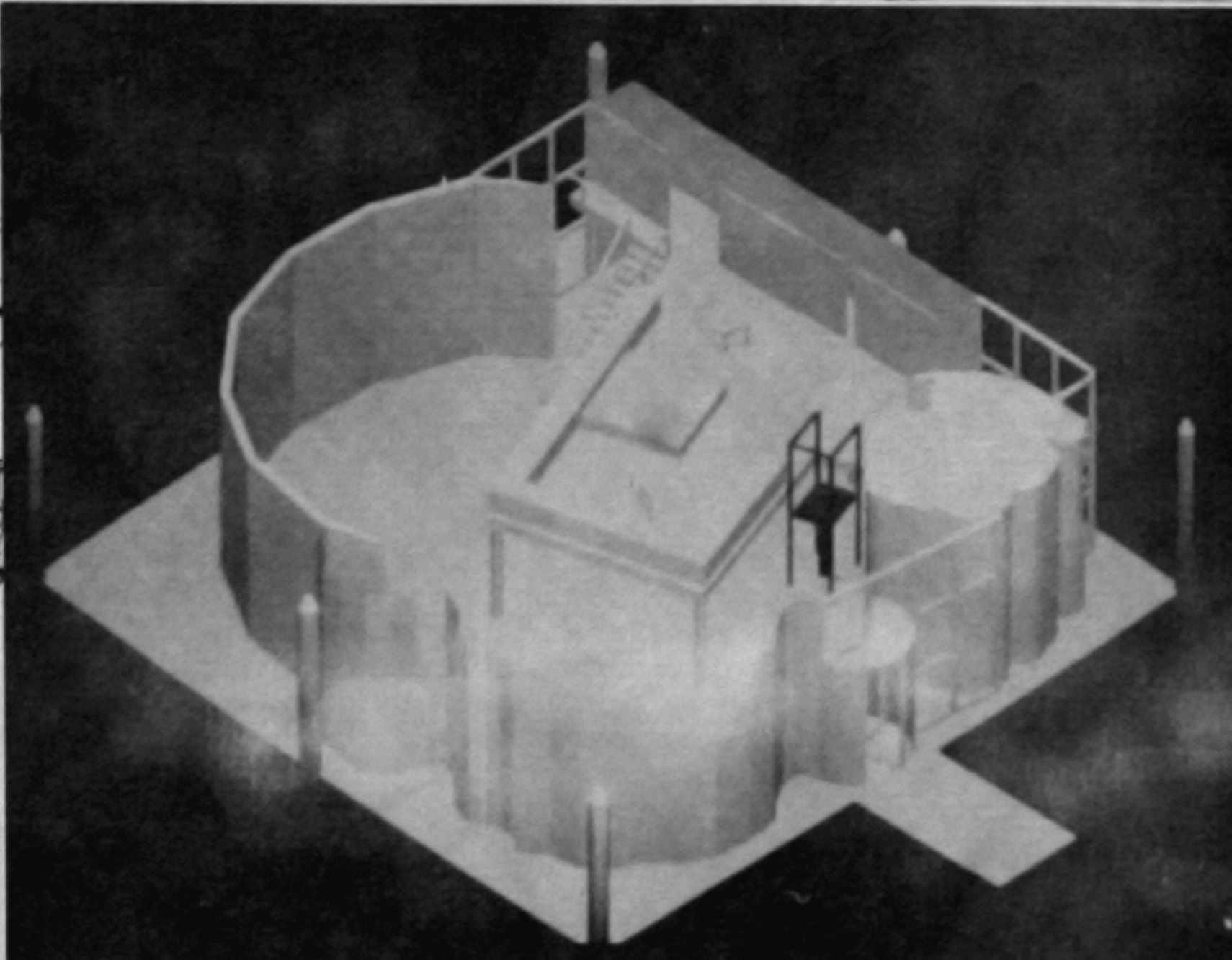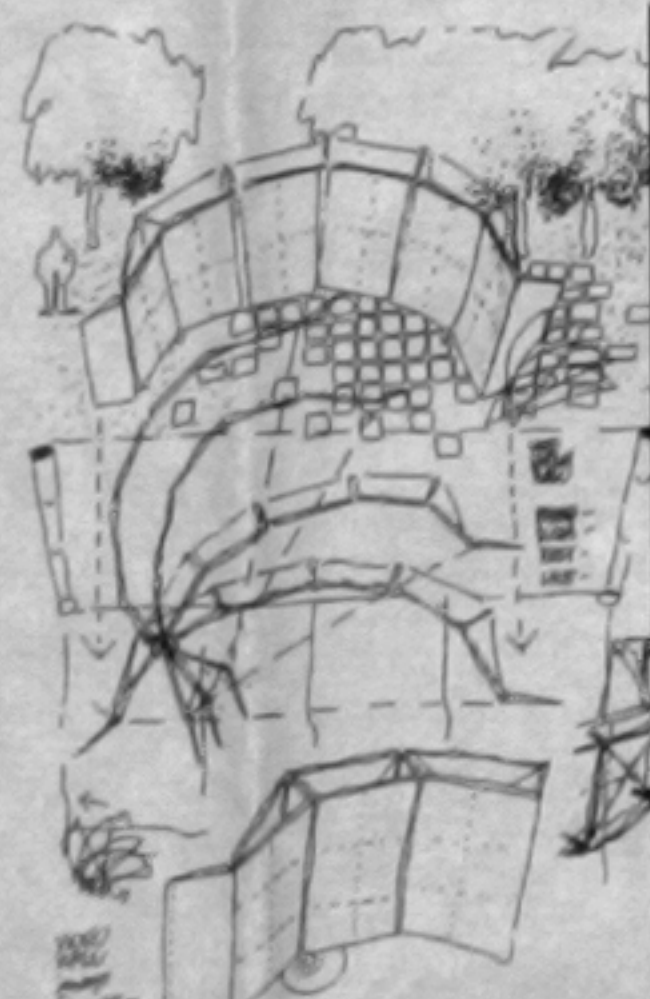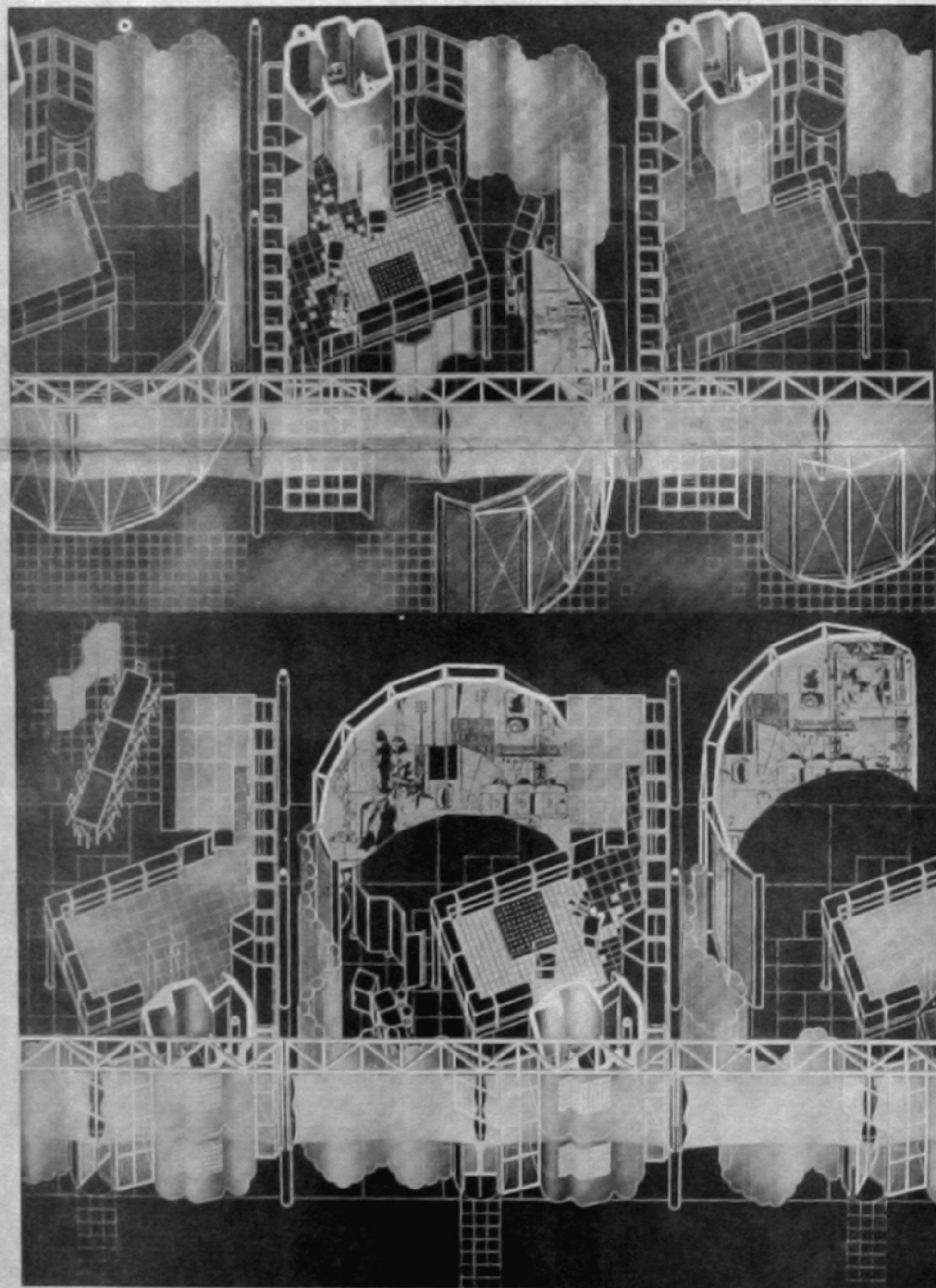
RON HERRON

A Londoner, who, at age of 15 went to the Brixton School of Building to learn carpentry, but discovered architecture.

• First job, in a one-man architectural practice, was as assistant/typist/telephonist/tea maker • Studied architecture at evening school, firstly at Brixton and later at the Polytechnic, Regent Street • In 1952 married Pat, his girlfriend from the age of sixteen • Son, Andrew, born in 1958 • After completing National Service (Ron is a 'veteran' of the Berlin airlift) joined London County Council Architects' Department in 1954 and met Warren Chalk and Dennis Crompton, and through a mutual friend, Peter Cook, David Greene and Mike Webb • In 1962 they together joined the Euston Project team with Robin Middleton, Brian Richards, Frank Linden and Alex Pike under Theo Crosby • The Archigram Group was born in this period and combined to produce Archigram magazine in 1966 and has done so, apart from a two-year gap, to the present [this needs to be updated] • Joined Warren Chalk in 1968 as Visiting Professor at University College of Los Angeles • Like Reyner Banham, fell in love with Los Angeles • Lived there for two years, and has managed a visit each year since • Returned in 1970 to form the Archigram office, with Peter Cook and Denis Crompton, on winning the Monte Carlo competition; after three years the project was shelved • After Archigram, joined Pentagram and became a partner from 1977-81 • Formed Herron Associates in 1982; joined by his sons, Andrew (1985) and Simon (1988) • Merged with Imagination Ltd. after completion of their Headquarters on Store Street, London, as Herron Associates at Imagination (bring up to date)

• A Leo, an optimist, enjoys the company of his friends; quiet, an Arsenal fan, enjoys drawing to illustrate his ideas rather than writing about them, and believes that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is magic'—

• Ron Herron passed away in 1994.